

VZCZCXYZ0014
OO RUEHWEB

DE RUEHDM #0201 0181442
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 181442Z JAN 06
FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6616
INFO RUEHXK/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE
RUEHGB/AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD 0579

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 000201

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

PARIS FOR ZEYA, LONDON FOR TSOU

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/18/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: STRONG INDICATIONS OF IMMINENT MASS AMNESTY TO INCLUDE JAILED MPS

Classified By: CDA Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4(b)/(d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Within the last two days, Post has received multiple indications of an imminent presidential mass amnesty for political prisoners. Reports indicate that if such an amnesty is granted, jailed MPs Riad Seif and Mamoun al-Homsy are mentioned most often as likely to be freed. The exact timing of such an amnesty remains unclear, as does the fate of jailed opposition figure Kamal Labwani and the other four 'Damascus Spring' political prisoners. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Following the absence of a presidential amnesty during the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha, rumors about a potential prisoner release began on January 14, when Agence France Press reported that jailed MPs Riad Seif and Mamoun al-Homsy had been released. Two human rights activists told Poloff on the morning of January 17 that this report was false, with activist Abdulkarim Rihawi citing a conversation with a local al-Jazeera correspondent, who had information from high-level officials from two security branches that the story was false.

¶3. (C) However, Post received credible reports on the evening of January 17 that a release was indeed imminent. Joumana Seif, daughter of Riad Seif, canceled a meeting with Poloff, saying that her father had called her and said he was being released, and that she was awaiting confirmation from Adraa prison authorities. In a follow-up conversation on the morning of January 18, Joumana Seif noted that she had not been contacted by anyone since the night before. Wissam Tarif, an associate of jailed activist Kamal Labwani, also told Poloff on January 18 that he had heard from a reliable journalist that all political prisoners, including Labwani, were to be released.

¶4. (C) In an afternoon conversation with Poloff on January 18, human rights lawyer Anwar al-Bunni told Poloff that the paperwork is currently in processing with the courts and had to be transferred to the prison, and that he expected the release to take place within hours. In another afternoon conversation, businessman Saeb Nahas, upon inquiry from the Charge, placed a call to a high-level contact in the SARG, who informed him that the release had in fact taken place and that Seif and Homsy were free. We have not been able yet to confirm that release or if other political prisoners were also released.

¶5. (C) Other contacts since January 17 have confirmed that the regime has decided to release the Damascus Spring detainees. Opinion is divided about whether Labwani will be included. Gadfly economist and former SARG official Riyad Abrash, who has sources inside the security services, says that release in the next day or so will form part of a

package of measures, including a cabinet reshuffle, designed to placate critics of Syria's internal politics. Al-Hayat journalist Ibrahim Hamidi, who also noted the report of a prisoner release, said the SARG is planning to reach out the opposition, at the same time, through National Democratic Front spokesman Hassan Abdul Azeem. Hamidi predicted that pending charges against Azeem in military court would be dropped in the coming days.

SECHE